



Southland receives a dismal report card

SCAG: An agency study says that much work needs to be done on infrastructure.

07:21 AM PST on Friday, February 6, 2004

By BRADLEY WEAVER / The Press-Enterprise

Traffic gridlock, worsening air quality and rising home prices are eroding the Southland's quality of life, a report by the Southern California Association of Governments concludes.

The State of the Region report released Thursday at the group's annual meeting in Los Angeles suggests that Southern California is not prepared for a population explosion expected to bring 6 million people to the region over the next 27 years.

The warning signs include rising traffic, lower housing affordability and dwindling college graduation rates among minorities.

The report said that regional planners and city leaders must work together to improve freeways and schools and find a way to balance growth with quality of life.

"This should be a wake-up call for the entire region," said Riverside Mayor Ron Loveridge, chairman of the task force that includes Riverside, San Bernardino, Orange, Los Angeles, Ventura and Imperial counties.

"These are serious problems that affect virtually everyone who lives here."

The report assigned grades to seven areas in 2002: employment, income, housing, mobility, air quality, education and safety. None of the grades improved from the previous year and the majority dropped to below-average or near-failing levels.



The region got various D grades in housing, transportation and education. Personal income and air quality each got C grades. The Southland performed best in employment and safety, which got B's.

Loveridge said state laws should be loosened to allow the region to control its future by using funds now controlled by Sacramento.

He added that the region's future will also be affected by the state's budget crisis, which threatens funding for road projects, public education and services provided by local governments.

Southern California again ranked as the nation's most congested metropolitan area and the average resident experienced 50 hours of delay each year due to traffic congestion. Inland Empire motorists spend 34 hours in traffic per year, a 70 percent increase since 1990, according to the report.

The solution?

Regional transportation leaders say that more homes need to be built near job sites - and more job sites near homes - to reduce time on the freeway. Motorists should also take advantage of public transit and carpooling.

"To find a home they can afford, (people) have to move farther and farther away from their job, which means they're spending more time on the roads and adding to our congestion and air-quality problems," said Santa Monica Councilwoman and SCAG member Pam O'Connor.

Southern California also had the highest percentage of residents who spend more than 30 percent of their incomes on housing, the report said. While more than half of the nation's households could afford a median-priced home in 2002, less than one-third of the Southland's residents could do the same. Median home prices are expected to reach \$300,000 in Riverside County and \$240,000 in San Bernardino County by the end of 2004. Nationally, the median home price is about \$175,000.

That's no surprise to San Bernardino resident Wendy Rosas, whose combined family income is \$90,000 a year. But she said that's not enough to get her family out of an apartment and into a home.

"The Inland Empire used to be inexpensive, but now homeownership seems more out of reach, even for people who are successful," Rosas said.

Still, Inland job growth continued to outpace that of its neighbors in 2002 with a nearly 3 percent increase from the previous year. That came during a time when the Southern California region lost 22,000 jobs, the first drop since a decade ago. The Southland's unemployment rate also increased from 5.1 percent to 6.1 percent, which is slightly above the national average of 5.8 percent.

The most drastic drop occurred in the air quality grade, which went from a B- in last year's report to a C this year. After years of steady improvement, the number of days exceeding federal ozone standards jumped from 36 to 49 days, and 2003 saw the first Stage 1 ozone alert in six years. The increased traffic and fewer carpoolers are largely responsible for the worsening air pollution, the report said.

Reach Bradley Weaver at (909) 368-9519 or bweaver@pe.com.

Online at: http://www.pe.com/localnews/inland/stories/PE_News_Local_report06.edc4.html